



# NEGATIVE THOUGHT TRAPS .....

# What are they?

Negative thought traps are very common patterns of thinking that we all fall into. They are rules and beliefs and ways of thinking that we have picked up along the way, and they end up becoming quite ingrained in terms of how we think and therefore the way we respond to things. They are called negative thought traps because they are not particularly useful to us. They can twist our thoughts and potentially make us jump to conclusions that aren't necessarily reflective of what is actually going on. Using a scientific perspective, this happens because our brain is constantly in survival mode and consequently has a natural drift towards a negative bias, influencing how we interpret a situation.

The great news is that we can easily work to combat the common negative thought traps by simply becoming more aware of what they are and then spotting them emerging in our everyday thoughts. Once you notice them, you can challenge them and choose to override them or look for different ways of thinking. This will improve your quality of thinking and contribute towards your psychological fitness.

Below, you will find the most common negative thought traps. Consider the tips to make sure you don't fall into them.

## All-or-nothing thinking (black and white thinking)

This type of thinking involves seeing things as being all good or all bad. For example, if your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure. This type of thinking causes people to see things at the extreme ends of either great or terrible. And this is extremely limiting.

**TRY:** Ask yourself the question "Is that really true?"

By asking yourself this, it gives you the opportunity to have more perspective and generate a much more balanced view. Remember that in between black and white exists a significant band of grey, and grey gives us many more options to choose from. Consider what grey looks like in relation to what you are thinking about, and the possibilities that a less rigid response would give you.

## Overgeneralisation

You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. If you have failed at something in the past, you believe that there is no use in trying because you will only fail again.

**TRY:** Ask yourself the question "Is that really true for this situation?"

By asking yourself this question, you will have a greater chance of recognising how all situations, regardless of how similar they may feel, are different. And therefore your response or the eventual outcome may not be as you anticipate it, simply because it didn't go well previously.

## Mental Filter

This type of thinking involves focusing on negative things so much that the positives are no longer seen. When an individual focuses so much on the negative, his/her vision of all reality becomes blurred.

**TRY:** Ask yourself the question "What evidence is there to prove that this may not be the case?"

By asking yourself this it means you won't be discounting the evidence that supports the positive aspects of a situation, and puts things into a better perspective by examining all of the facts.

## Mind Reading

You think or assume that someone is reacting negatively to you even though you don't actually know what they are thinking.

**TRY:** Ask yourself the question "Can I know for sure that this is really true?"

By asking yourself this question it helps you consider if there really is truth in what you think someone else is thinking. Because you cannot absolutely know how someone is thinking unless you ask them. Use this to start introducing some alternative perspectives which will help to eliminate the mistaken certainty that you know what they are thinking.

## The Fortune Teller Error

You anticipate or predict that in the future things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact.

**TRY:** Ask yourself the question "Can I know for sure that this is really true?"

This question can help you gain a better perspective on what you are currently predicting in the future. How can you possibly know for sure if it is going to go the way you think? Where is the evidence that there is this certain outcome? Now consider different and positive outcomes and focus on them.

## Catastrophising

When you think something is a full-blown catastrophe when in reality, it is not. This type of thinking involves using words like horrible or terrible to describe an event. It also makes problems seem bigger than we can handle by thinking things like, "I can't stand it." When our thinking is exaggerated it is like pouring fuel on a fire - it only makes the problem and the negative emotional reaction worse. Try using a catastrophe scale of 1-100 to determine how bad a problem actually is. When you keep things in perspective your emotions stay in perspective.

**TRY:** Complete the sentence "A more likely outcome would be..."

Completing this sentence simply gives you more perspective. The catastrophic outcome is one potential outcome, but there are numerous others that are more likely.

## Should Statements

You try and motivate yourself with "should" and "shouldn't". "Must" and "ought" are also offenders and the emotional consequence of these is guilt. Also, when you direct "should" statements towards others, you feel anger, frustration and resentment.

**TRY:** Ask yourself the question "According to whom?" or swap 'should' for 'could'.

If you recognise that you are using these 'should' words, then asking this question will make you consider where this rule has come from and, if it doesn't work for you or if it is something you know you need to do, change your words to "I'm choosing to do this because....".

## Labelling and Mislabelling

This happens when we start using insulting language in our thinking to describe either ourselves or others. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a loser." When someone else's behaviour rubs you up the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him, "He's an idiot."

**TRY:** Complete the sentence "That's not true because..."

Completing this sentence helps you identify evidence that contradicts this negative label about yourself and others.

## Personalisation

You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event when in fact, you are not actually responsible (or not fully responsible). Whatever happens in life there are always a number of factors (external and internal) that contribute towards something happening.

**TRY:** Ask yourself the question “Am I the only reason that is happening/they are responding that way/that turned out that way?”

By asking yourself this question you enable yourself to see that there are many factors that contribute towards the way someone is responding to something. It is never just about you which is an important point to recognise.